



Common Ground World Project

*Neil Tetkowski had a vision for a project that involved the world.
Linda Kuehne reports*



*Top: Earth from all Nations. 6 m/long.
Above: Detail of samples.*

CLAY SCULPTOR NEIL TETKOWSKI is an artist, philosopher and political activist. Through force of personality, skill and ideas, he creates art that attempts to reflect truth as conveyed through universal symbols and action that mean something to all of us, something in common to reflect the human condition. Five years ago Tetkowski submitted a quixotic proposal to the United Nations called *Common Ground World Project*. Developed as a response to the crisis of a worsening environment worldwide and the loss of our sense of community, his idea was to use the power of art to promote a shared responsibility for the environment and respect for the global ecosystem. A 'world clay body' from all nations would be used to create a large plate-like disk in the form of a mandala. Tetkowski felt the mandala, a universal symbol employed by many cultures to represent regeneration, healing and reconciliation, was aptly suited to clay with its references to the earth, the circle, the wheel. The sculpture would be exhibited at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, the universal symbol for worldwide cooperation.



The artist is a person active in society.
Duchamp

The artwork of *Common Ground World Project* consists not only of a sculpture created from the world clay body but also the process necessary to make that sculpture. Tetkowski consciously planned every aspect of the conceptual work. It was a seemingly simple idea that was, in fact, complicated to realise. First, the proposal had to be accepted by the UN, no small feat, when one is dealing with such a complex organisation. Then funding had to be obtained to support the effort to collect, test and mix the clay from 188 countries into a workable clay body – a monumental task involving thousands of people from many socio-economic strata – private, corporate and government. In April, 2000, with the first phase completed, the clay part of the sculpture was made over a three-week period on a large sculptural aluminum table designed by the artist. While visitors and tourists watched, representatives from each country placed a fired sample of their country's clay into the soft world clay of the mandala. To accompany this part of the project, Tetkowski created an installation of 188 glass bottles filled with clay from each country. All were displayed on a long aluminum table (also designed by Tetkowski) serving as a pedestal – the parts that manifest the whole. In the next phase, the artist continued the work of fundraising to complete the fabrication of the aluminum base on which to place the clay mandala. In April, 2002, the project was finally completed with an exhibition of the sculpture at the UN headquarters in New York.

Unlike some contemporary art today, this project speaks immediately and directly to the heart and mind of the viewer/participant, without having to be interpreted by others as to its meaning. When one looks at the mandala, made of clay from every country in the world, one thinks of the people who contributed to the project, the enormous effort it took as well as the aesthetic

*The Clay Mandala
installed in the foyer
of the United
Nations, NY.*



Above: Neil Tetkowski at the United Nations, NY. Neil Tetkowski has an undergraduate degree from Alfred University and an MFA from Illinois State. He taught at Denison University and the State University College, Buffalo, NY. Since 1987 he has been an independent artist living in NY. Right: Detail of the clays from around the world embedded in the mandala for the **Common Ground World Project**.



beauty of the piece. Two and one half metres in diameter, referencing the functional, the plate is transformed into sculpture by virtue of its size, into conceptual art by virtue of its ideas. Not only does *Common Ground World Project* represent the confluence of aesthetic, socio-political and technological concerns of the artist but also of the contributors worldwide who enthusiastically participated. Developed on the premise that art may have social significance as well as a social function, the project connects us to a genuine truth that proves that art serves as one of the best connections between the mind, the spirit and the physical world. All aspects of this project – the skill of the individual artist, the participation of people, as well as Tetkowski's ideas about life, the world and society – were formal strategies designed to serve the philosophical aim of the work: to become a larger-than-life symbol of world unity.

Tetkowski has found himself increasingly drawn to sculpture and performance art as a way to better express his ideas about society, its relation to the world and nature. In the early 1980s he began giving workshops where he not only demonstrated various techniques but also began collaborating with the audience. With the audience not only observing but also participating in the process, he felt there was an increased awareness of the concepts and issues he was trying to communicate. Accordingly, Tetkowski's work in recent years has been more process and idea-driven than object oriented. It has taken place in public arenas along with the more traditional artworld venues like galleries and museums. As his work has evolved, it has often combined performance-based activities with the making of a sculpture, media events, exhibitions and installations.¹

With *Common Ground World Project* a seemingly impossible goal was achieved, not by a governmental body or corporation or wealthy individual, but by a clay artist whose desire to create a powerful symbol of global unity included inspiring thousands of people around the world to join him in the process of making the sculpture. Tetkowski's is an art of engagement.

REFERENCE:

1. *Ceramics, Art and Perception*, No. 14, 1993, 'Clay, Steel Confrontation & Concern' by Manya Fabiniak; *Ceramics, Art and Perception*, No. 43, 2001, 'Neil Tetkowski: Urban Ikebana' by David Revere McFadden.

Linda Kuehne is a ceramic artist and writer from Pound Ridge, NY.